

Miraculous Provision

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Preacher: Derek Lamont

[0 : 00] We turn back with me to the reading that we had from 2 Kings, 2 Kings chapter 4 and the story of the widow's oil.

Great story in the life of Elisha, we're looking at the life of Elisha for a few Sunday evenings. We've seen that Elisha is one of the prophets who came to remind the people of their need to, usually of their need to return to God, to go back to God and the story of the Kings is kind of like an undulating hill, it goes up and down, people are climbing close to God and then they're far away from God and He sends a prophet to bring them closer and to remind them to get to repent and turn back to God. And they also point forward, we saw that, that the prophets point forward, not only revealing God but pointing forward to Jesus, to the coming of Jesus and Elisha is very often spoken of as the prophet that looks most like Jesus, as it were, who reminds us most of Jesus.

And in this section we find, it kind of is a linking section between the various sections of the book between the judgment of God's people where they're falling far away from God and falling into the kind of, the judgment of rebelling against Him and also the restoration of the people when they see the power and authority of God.

And Elisha here, and in the early stories is very much dealing with his own credentials, as it were, as a prophet.

[1 : 47] We look back in it now and we read Scripture, we read the Bible and we see and we understand these guys were prophets of God, well because we know they were prophets of God and because we have the whole story. But in the present, when they were living, they really only could be confirmed as the prophets of God, not just by their life and by their message, but when their prophecies came to fulfilment and that was how a genuine prophet was set apart from a false prophet who would maybe prophesy great things, but they wouldn't happen.

The prophet of God warned and spoke of what God would do if people turned and continued to turn away from him, as well as bringing them teaching from God's word.

So I want to take the story of the widow's oil a little bit this evening and take it out of its section here and look at it and unpack it a little bit and then apply it to ourselves and apply some of the lessons that I hope we can take from it into our own Christian lives.

Because the background is fine to this story, can I say the macro picture, the big picture is fine in this story.

Jesus, as we've mentioned, he's kind of confirming his credentials as a prophet, not just by what he's saying, but by the miracles that he's performing and they are great and important miracles.

[3 : 19] And it's part of the story of God's ongoing purpose for the nation, bringing him to the point of reliance and trust and pointing them forward to the redeemer, to the coming of the Savior who will be born through the womb of this nation, Israel.

And it's the story of God protecting that nation in order for Jesus to be able to come in years future. And that's fine and that's clear and that's obvious in the wider, the bigger picture.

But here we've got a personal subplot. We've got a little small story in the big story of God's purposes for the universe. And it's a little story about a widow, a woman who is in great need and Alicia comes into contact with her.

She's a grieving widow and she is in a terrible condition. She is, we're told here, the wife of one of the company, a wife of a man from the company of the prophets, from the prophet theological seminary.

She's one of the wives of one of these guys training and working and preaching, serving. And he has died.

[4 : 53] She's a widow. And she's in deep, deep poverty. Not only is she in poverty, but she owes a great deal of money to a creditor.

We don't know anything about the story. We don't know what's happened. But there was obviously a situation that had arisen that meant that she was in deep poverty.

And whoever her creditor was had pretty, obviously not much sympathy. There's nothing left in her house to take. There's nothing left for her to give apart from her two sons who would be sold as slaves.

And it's a bleak future. It's a terrible personal tragedy that this woman is going through. And she brings that to the prophet. It's not really part of the macro picture as such.

It's a, this personal subplot. And you know, her request to God, as it were, because she requests through the prophet recognizing this man as a man of God, she says simply to him, your servant, my husband is dead.

[6 : 09] And you know that he revered the Lord. But now his creditor is coming to take my two sons, my two boys as his slaves. My husband gave up everything to serve you.

He was here. He was learning the trade. He was at the theological seminary. He says, young man, I've got young sons. And he's gone. He's been taken. I've lost him.

This is the God. And he was serving your God. He was serving our God. He's gone. And now I'm in absolute abject need in poverty. It's a desperate request, isn't it?

It's desperately stark. There's no frills about this prayer. There's nothing fancy. There's nothing theological. She doesn't even come with answers. She doesn't know what to ask for.

There just is a great cry of emptiness and need. This is my condition. This is what I'm going through. It's a desperate cry for help. Where are you, God? Where is God in this situation?

[7 : 07] And why haven't there been answers before now? It's just a desperate request that she makes to her God through Elisha at this point.

And it's a great story, isn't it? It's a great little story because it's a fantastic answer that Elisha gives. How can I help you tell me what of you in your house?

And she says, I don't have anything. There's nothing left here. There's nothing whatsoever except a little oil. So she says, go to your neighbors. Okay, a creditor isn't going to help you here.

The creditor's got it out for you. But go to your neighbors. Go to people that you know and that you've known for years. And ask them for all their empty jars. Ask them for all their empty containers.

And don't just ask for a few. Don't just go to your immediate neighbor and get one empty Robinson's jar. Just go to all of your neighbors and get everything they've got.

[8 : 08] Don't just ask for a little. And then go in and shut the door with your sons and pour the little oil you have into the jars. And as each is filled, put it to one side.

Don't just ask for a little. And so she does that. She left him and she does what he asked and she kept pouring. That's a great, isn't that a great, she just kept pouring.

When the jars were full, she said to her son, brew me another one. And he said, there's nothing left. There's no jars left. That's it. It's finished. It's done. And then the oil stopped flowing and then he told the man of a ghost sell the oil.

Pay your debts. You and your sons can live on what is left. Isn't it great? It's a great, basic, simple, encouraging story that he takes the little ordinary items, the stuff that she had, but also the kind of empty, ordinary stuff that her neighbors had.

And he makes it as much as she could take. And it brought great hope and great encouragement.

[9 : 16] And a much more rosier, brighter future for her, a practical level as she saw God cared for her in this way.

Now it's a subplot, isn't it? It's a subplot to redemption. The story of Alicia is all about a prophet pointing forward to the coming of the Savior, prophesying that he would come and prophesying that the people needed to be in covenant relationship with God.

And it's this nice subplot that reminds us that the Bible deals with ordinary people and brings God into their situation. So can we unpack it at some different levels of application?

Because whether we take it as simply a story as part of the ongoing outworking of the Old Testament history, we need to remember that all of the Bible is God's word for us.

All of it has authority. He would have read this word, read this story, read this passage and he would have called that God's word.

[10:20] He would have taken it with authority as God's word. And it points us, Alicia, in his prophetic role, there is a Christ likeness about Alicia that points us forward even in this story to the Redeemer, to Christ and the Gospel.

So as we unpack that and as we apply it to our lives, I'm sure there are many different levels of application. The first is simply the story itself.

I could say I'm envious now. You probably think, right, that would be good. And you would just have an interesting and encouraging story to go away with from God's word.

One that would lift you up, would encourage you, would I hope encourage you to praise Him and to be reminded that this sovereign, great, holy, powerful, infinite and eternal God would be interested enough in this widow to provide for in such a way through the prophet Alicia.

It's a great story. We can thank and praise Him for the story in and of itself. But it also is there to inspire and encourage our own prayer life in our 21st century Christian living.

[11:47] The background to this woman's story is one of desperation, isn't it? We don't know anything about it, really. We don't know her. We don't know her name. We don't know anything about her background. We don't know her husband died. We don't know how old her children were.

We don't know what the creditor was. Her cry was one of desperation, even though possibly even she as a woman of faith might have been able to see the bigger picture of God's provision eternally in her life.

And maybe for us the bigger picture in our Christian lives is fine. We understand long time ago Calvary, but that made a huge, huge difference to our lives because Jesus Christ died there.

And we know that ultimately He's sovereign in control of things and that in the future we will go and live with Him in glory forever. We understand the bigger picture.

But I wonder about the subplot of your life this evening, the micro picture of your life and of your needs that doesn't seem to match the bigger picture of a concerned and interested and loving God, that there may be some very real and deep-seated needs in your life that aren't, well, they are spiritual in the sense that you're asking God about them as this widow was taking her complaint to God.

[13:13] But it's a very real, practical need or desperate situation you find yourself in. Well, the good thing, isn't it for us to remind ourselves this evening is that that is fine.

That is okay. And it's okay to take it to God. And it's right and improper to plead before God about these things.

That we can confess our need before Him and express our feelings. And isn't it interesting, you know, it's not as if God didn't know this woman's situation.

It's not as if God said, oh, what if I'd known that? I would have. It's not that God is surprised by this woman's cry or by her situation. She knows it.

He knows it. But nonetheless, he encourages her through the Prophet and we're encouraged, even though God knows our situations, to lay before him the facts of our situation as they were to just make, allow ourselves to work through our situation and lay it before God.

[14:30] That's the encouragement here that we can see prayer as simply a cry of our situation before God, our need before God, whatever that need happens to be.

And I don't know what your need may be this evening. I don't know if you're honest enough to consider that you have a need. Maybe you don't have a specific, desperate request.

It may be that we're blind to some of the spiritual needs that we have. But it is a great thing to present our needs and our situations before God.

Just the facts. She doesn't tell him how to answer. She doesn't ask for anything. She is simply laying out her need before God and almost says, you know, well, God, what are you going to do about this situation?

I've entrusted my life to you. My husband gave his life for you and I don't understand why he's not here. He was going to give a life of service to you. He's no even longer here. He's taken him.

[15:45] And what will you do about that? That is where God excels, isn't it? The sinner's cry is, Lord, be merciful.

Help me in my time of need. And God is the one who will answer that request his way, which will always be better than our way.

Would the widow have ever gone to God and said, Lord, I'm in this desperate situation. How about sending me to my neighbors for all the empty vessels that they have there and I'll just use the little

bit of oil that I've got and it'll never run out.

Far above and beyond what she would ever have thought of. She wouldn't have had that request. I don't know what she would have asked for, but we simply go to God and we make our requests and we pour out our need before him.

It might be an impossible situation. You might be in deep seated need this evening. You may be contemplating suicide. I don't know.

[16:49] But we take our requests and we take our needs before the living God. So we see that in his personal prayer lies, but also maybe we recognize it in the lesson that God gives in the answer with respect to our practical spirituality.

Alicia didn't pray with her. He didn't sit down and do a Bible study. He didn't condemn her or correct her.

He simply acted according to her need. Now, sometimes we can be very pious in the needs or the way we respond to the needs of other people.

Some people in their Christian lives have great, maybe great practical needs. And we can be very pious in giving them spiritual answers to their needs.

Alicia here gives no sermon and makes no judgment and simply acts in grace. Looking on what God has obviously commanded him to do and practically helping her.

[18:15] And that's a great lesson for us because very often God will use our practical love and our practical concerns to provide miraculous answers in people's lives.

Sometimes our mouths need to be shut and our arms need to be open as we serve and follow the living God. And it can often be our small acts of service and love and grace that can intervene in people's desperate need to bring miraculous answers.

Not miraculous in one way, in the sense that what we're doing can be very ordinary in the same way that going to collect different vessels from other people's houses is a miraculous thing to do. But it was used in a miraculous way by God. And as we are sensitive to the needs of others and to the concerns of others and to serve others as we were mentioning this morning, then that in itself can be a powerful living sermon in their lives so that God uses the community of believers to fulfill His purposes.

Even in this story, it's her neighbors that she goes to. They don't have a great deal to do but nonetheless they still have to be willing to give their empty containers to her.

[19:48] And God doesn't ask us to do much in our neighborly love and concern for one another as Christians. But it's the small things that you will do and the small acts of grace and love that you will engage in and your willingness to give and to serve that God will use miraculously and God will use to change people's lives.

And it's that whole concept of being not individuals but being a people together. And just in terms of different levels of application, let's also just briefly look at the wider spiritual application of this passage to ourselves, reminding ourselves of our Savior and as Alicia shadows our Savior and as an example as it were of our Savior.

Many of the miracles that Alicia performed were to deepen his credentials as a prophet of God and we need to remind ourselves of the credentials of a redeemer of the Lord Jesus Christ in our lives that He's already paid the price for us.

He has forgiven our sins. He has miraculously brought us from death to life and so we can trust Him and we can believe Him and we can go to Him in prayer.

That's what we can do. That's the kind of Savior that we have. His credentials have already been stamped onto history for us so that in our lives and in our need we can go and we can be provided for and we can cry out to Him.

[21:34] And in doing so we can remind ourselves of the extravagance of grace. I'm not sure what the widow was looking for but what she got was far more than she expected and I'm not sure what you're expecting in your Christian life but as you go to God and as you pray and as you serve God then you will find that you will get far more than you expect but you need to trust Him and you need to go to Him in order to do that.

He will give us far more than we can ask or imagine. I wonder have you ever been in that situation in your Christian life? Have you? You've been in that situation where you've been in need and it's been an impossible situation and you've prayed to God and cried out.

You might not even have given a request or asked for anything but in answer He has given much more than you can ask or even imagine and it's bolstered your faith.

And that's the case and it's only appreciated by those who are desperate. This widow truly appreciated what God had done for her because she was desperate.

Had she been living in a palace it wouldn't have been so good. It wouldn't have made such an impression but she was desperate and so this answer was such an extravagant expression of grace.

[23 : 04] It was as much as she could take. She could take no more. It was absolutely as much as she could take. And that is the greatness of grace.

It is not something that is miserly or miserable. It's as much as we can take. It will fill us to the full. And it is an extravagant reality for us. Book by Max Lucado called Come Thirsty and he speaks about grace, a grace blockage in the church and he says, taste but don't drink.

Wet your lips but never slake your thirst. Can you imagine such instruction over a fountain? Don't swallow this water. Just fill your mouth but not your belly.

It's absurd. What good is water if we can't drink it and what good is grace if we don't let it go deep? What image best describes your heart?

[24 : 06] A water-drenched kid dancing in front of an open fire hydrant or a bristled desert tumbleweed? Grace is extravagant and he wants us to be filled with his grace in our lives and his provision.

And that provision is marked by the ongoing unlimited gift of the Holy Spirit for us in our lives. Now oil is very often symbolic of God's spirit and maybe it's stretching the image too far from the story but nonetheless there's this clear picture that God provides for us, the Holy Spirit, in our lives to fill us and to anoint us to enable us to serve him.

And God comes and multiplies the little that we have, both the little we have personally and the little we have in community and among our neighbours.

He will take that and multiply it for the service. I look at the needs around in this congregation. I look at what I'm supposed to do as a preacher and as a leader.

I look at the lives of some people and the struggles that they're having, the difficulties. I look at the teaching that I ought to be doing, that I am doing. I see all these things and it seems overwhelming and it seems like there's a continual failure to reach the standards that we could reach by God's grace.

[25 : 47] I guess it can end up becoming quite legalistic and quite self-determining in many ways. And we need to remember that he simply asks us to come with the little that we have in terms of our own natural gifts and abilities and what he has given us and he will use that when we come to him in need and in dependency and he will use what we are as a community.

And all our struggles and all our mistakes and all our failure and all our efforts that have gone wrong, he will use that as we come and we are dependent on him.

And that is a great encouragement that he doesn't require human greatness. He simply requires that we recognise that he miraculously will multiply what we do for him.

And I guess for us the greatest barrier to that blessing, to that overwhelming provision that is displayed in this story is our own self-sufficiency.

Is that we don't ask. The greatest barrier is self-sufficiency. The woman is a great example of faith here, this widow.

[27 : 10] She cried out to the Prophet, to the one who was her hotline to God and to heaven. And she acted in faith on his command.

She cried and she acted on faith. She did what she was asked. She got all the jars she could. It might have seemed like a crazy request.

What would we have done? We've just gone to maybe one and two people. She got all the jars she could. She just did what she was, you know, it stated to us and it's very important, you know, don't just get a few.

Get as many as you can. She acted in faith and God supplied more than she could have dreamed of in response.

The greatest barrier to her would have been if she hadn't cried and if she hadn't acted in obedience to what was commanded.

[28 : 12] The power of the Holy Spirit in our lives, the power of a changed life and of a blessed Christian life is similarly linked to being spiritually needy and being obedient, not being self-sufficient Christians, not living as if we were practical atheists, not living without reference to God in our day-to-day living.

This is no great massive significant theological high point in this woman's life. This is a cry, day-to-day living of desperate need and the power of the Holy Spirit in our life was linked to that cry for help and to the act of obedient faith.

And so often for us, the great barrier to us knowing blessing in our Christian lives and knowing sustenance and life and vision, even when things are difficult, is that we don't ask.

And we're not willing to obey. And we're not willing to receive. We want maybe our own answers or we want to do our things our way.

We're to come, we're to be like spiritual all of ours, coming back for more, looking for more, depending on Him more, coming to God with these empty cups, needing forgiveness, needing new faith, needing wisdom, needing grace, needing answers to our desperate needs, needing strength and suffering, needing strength to cope, needing opportunities, needing courage, needing miracles, needing vision.

[29 : 55] These are what we're to come to God seeking for Him to fill in our lives. And God is absolutely willing. But we need to come Thursday.

We can't come to Him with our lives full of pride, greed, intransigence, hardcore unbelief, our sinful lusts and desires, it's already taking up all the place that we're meant to give to God.

So we come forgiven and come in forgiveness and come in need and find God's transformational answers in our lives.

So I hope that we can take some practical lessons and apply them to our own lives and hearts today. Amen. Let's bow our heads briefly and pray. Father God, we pray that you would take your word and apply it to our lives today.

We thank you for this great story in the middle of the history of God's people of a very ordinary person with a very real need, a very desperate situation, but who took her practical desperation to God and to obeyed what God asked her to do through Elisha.

[31 : 33] We thank you for that. We thank you that we are also asked to come in need to the living God and to accept Jesus as our Savior and to trust and obey.

Forgive us when we are not obedient to you out of gratitude. When we are selfish or greedy or rebellious and when we don't pray and when we don't read the Bible to learn about you and when we go our own way and when we seek happiness and joy and contentment away from you.

Forgive us for these things and help us to help one another, to live the Christian life and to be the answers sometimes that end up being miraculous when we are willing to be used by God.

The neighbors Lord God didn't know anything about the miracle initially. They simply were willing to give their empty jars to a friend. And so may we also unwittingly, just through our obedient care and sacrificial love for one another, find ourselves in places of miracle and of grace for Jesus' sake.

Amen.